



Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads. Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature.

By Madeleine C. Seys

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This is a book about the ostensibly insubstantial, about the stuff which was not destined to survive. In it Madeleine C. Seys examines issues of dress in relation to the overarching genre of popular fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century, with particular attention to the narratives of a corpus of twelve works by the likes of Collins, Braddon, and Wells in addition to Ella Hepworth Dixon and Grant Allen, amongst others. Over the course of the four chapters dedicated to specific garments and types of cloth (White Muslin; Silk and Velvet; The Paisley Shawl; Tweed and Wool), Seys traces changes in women's dress in the period but, more importantly, also "changing social and narrative possibilities for heroines within contemporary notions of femininity and sexuality, and within styles and genres of popular literature" (534).

In an age of distant reading, this is a book which is instead lavish in its attention to detail, providing a series of compelling close readings of the works under examination. Seys demonstrates repeatedly the intricacies and developments concerning dress which occur within these narratives. Dress consequently emerges as something mobile and tricky, rather than fixed and easily legible throughout. Indeed, it is clear that the more recognisable and established are literary and sartorial codes, the more readily they can be manipulated and played with. Seys attends both to a heroine's overall look or looks as well as to scenes in which characters select, don and divest themselves of different garments.

Seys is meticulously attentive to questions of colour, texture, fabric and cut, and to their varying effects within the narrative: "a gown of scarlet satin" for instance, "has different connotations to one of scarlet velvet", she writes (232). The thematic structuring, by fabric type and colour or garment successfully articulates key developments and evolution with respect to both narrative and dress. The story told would have been more effective still had the representativeness of the corpus been established: that Dixie's cross-dressing female prime minister heralds a new white-clad world order is very compelling, but we are given no sense at all of how typical such a work was in 1899. Similarly, the reason for the focus on these particular novels is never stated outright, nor is it clear why the many alternatives to be found in serial publications or adventure stories, poetry or memoirs do not come under her microscopic lens (for diaphanous cladding, especially in the imperial context fairly frequently evoked, it is hard not to think of Rider Haggard's *She*, for instance). Similarly, the chapter on paisley shawls opens the discussion beyond garments *per se* to accessories. This might be unproblematic in itself, but it does open up a vast hinterland of shoes, necklaces, bonnets and muffs – to name but a few – equally worthy of attention.

The works which are selected are shown to be highly arresting and compelling. Seys's account of them makes one want to read or re-read them immediately. Even more importantly, she demonstrates the longer historiography of fashion/fiction writing with

reflections by the likes of Oliphant and the wonderfully named Deliverance Dingle drawn on in detail. Highlighting the longstanding nature of the interest in the interrelationship between fashion and fiction in this way is perhaps the key contribution of this study.

Overall this book does cover new ground and bring new material to the table. Popular fiction gets the attention it deserves and it benefits from the wider framing of references to some of the best-known and most celebrated works of the long nineteenth century by the likes of Austen, Eliot and James. The highly “fashioned” or self-conscious nature of popular fiction emerges very clearly as a result of this analysis. *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads* has the immense advantage of not getting bogged down in the turgid details of what are dismissively referred to as “hemline histories”. Seys provides useful overviews of changing trends in dress and of the various narrative functions served by “sartorial description” (14). It is, of course, a book crying out for illustration, and it is very much to Seys’s credit that she mounts her argument without their assistance. Her often pithy prose guides the reader through what is an important new contribution to fashion/fiction scholarship.

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